

Participatory Esthetics

By HILTON KRAMER

THE new "Spaces" exhibition, which Jennifer Licht has organized at the Museum of Modern Art, places the visitor to the museum in an unfamiliar situation. At least the situation is unfamiliar so far as museum-going is concerned, though the visitor to the exhibition will already have gleaned something of its basic strategy if he has had any experience of the new styles of theater and dance, or the old happenings, or, for that matter, group therapy, discotheques, graduate seminars, political demonstrations, cooking classes, orgies, cocktail parties, holy communion, public baths, or the family dinner table. He must, in other words, be prepared to become a participant in an event which is social or communal character if he is to experience anything of its nature or substance.

The events in this case are, of course, purely esthetic. The visitor enters various "spaces," each designed to realize a particular esthetic conception, and he is obliged to modify — if only, at times, very slightly — his customary museological role as a detached observer if he is to perceive the realization of the conception. The required participation is, to be sure, of a rather passive character. In the "Spaces" show, the spectator spends most of his time doing what he always does at museum shows — standing, walking, looking. But at this exhibition he may also choose to be wrapped in a canvas shroud and play dead for a few minutes, and he will in any case be doing almost as much listening as looking. What he will not be doing is looking at art objects. As Mrs. Licht remarks in her essay for the "Spaces" catalogue, the visitor to the exhibition "is presented with a set of conditions rather than a finite object."

The conditions vary a good deal. In the space designed by Dan Flavin, one finds — not for the first time — large constructions of fluorescent light tubes. This time the colors are yellow and green. The result looks remarkably like a room filled with the light of yellow and green fluorescent light tubes. Michael Asher offers a more soothing physical experience — a room whose walls, ceiling and floor are covered with white acoustical panels. Sound is muffled, but audible; the light is dimmed to a shadowy gray, but one can still see. But what does one see? A room of dim lights and shadows encased in white acoustical panels.

Then on to the space of Larry Bell. I am told that in this space there are huge panels of vacuum-coated glass. I believe it, but I have no first-hand evidence in the matter. This space is, except for one small, barely perceptible area in the distance, completely black. Why it requires the expensive and complex technology of vacuum-coated glass to create a black space of this sort, I

have no idea. Perhaps the metaphysicians of Artforum will explain.

Then, Robert Morris' space. One enters a room that is slightly refrigerated. One walks along high steel-faced trenches that form a cross. At the top of these trenches one can see, planted in eye-fooling vistas, tiny spruce trees. The trees are being kept alive through some very sophisticated horticultural technology. They even have their own rain.

Now to the space of Franz Erhard Walther. If the artist happens to be present — there is a schedule of his personal appearances posted — you are invited to step into his space, the floor of which is covered with canvas, and be fitted into one or another of his canvas-covered objects and receptacles. (This space, incidentally, has a glass wall facing on 54th Street.) I must confess that I cannot speak here as a participant, but as a mere observer I can report that the whole procedure looked like a lot of fun for anyone yearning to be tucked into his crib again or wondering what it felt like to be fitted for a straight-jacket.

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I should have noted earlier that at the entrance to the "Spaces" exhibition one is obliged to remove one's shoes and don paper slippers. For now, after seeing or experiencing Mr. Walther's "Instruments for Processes," off come the paper slippers and, restored to his own shoes (and, if he is wise, rubbers or boots as well), the visitor may enter the museum's outdoor sculpture garden to see and hear the most ambitious of the "Spaces" spectacles — an "environment" of visual and aural sensation designed by the Pulsa group.

According to the catalogue the materials employed in Pulsa's untitled outdoor environment are as follows: environmental sensors, voltage controlled sound and signal synthesizer, computer, teletype, high speed punch-paper tape reader, data-phone decoder, remote facilities, speakers, strobe lights, infrared heaters. Indoors, the Pulsa control booth has been set up just outside the entrance to the museum cafeteria for all to see, and the visibility of the instruments is, I gather, an article of faith for Pulsa. One of their statements in the catalogue reads: "it's important for people to understand the tool, so that it can't be used to manipulate them. Society has got to be aware of all aspects of its tools."

The museum describes the Pulsa spectacle as "a light, sound and heat environment," but it was only the light that made any impression on my own no doubt imperfect sensorium. The 60 strobe lights situated at various stations around the sculpture garden, flashing very briefly in response to aural, atmospheric, and god knows what other stimuli, provide a rather beautiful, free-form pointillist display for the eye.

One has the hang about the garden for a fairly long time to "get" the effect, and at January temperatures it's not exactly a picnic. (Forget about those infrared heaters; their function to provide atmospheric signals, not to relieve the cold.) The sound effects are the usual electronic bore, the Musak of advanced technology. But the lights are quite delightful.

Mrs. Licht suggests that art of this persuasion "may be developing a new humanism in its incorporation within its context of man and his actions and reactions." It would certainly be lovely to think so. But to judge by the evidence at hand, the results of this vast investment in technology, imagination, and hardware are pathetically trivial. A good deal of visual as well as technical intelligence has gone into these disparate conceptions, but the experience they afford is so slight, the demands they make on one's sensibility so shallow and so temporary, that one cannot help feeling a little sad about the kind of mind that nourishes itself on such meager ideas and such slender emotions.

Perhaps, though, this criticism is only a confession of my own generational distance from the brave new world which "Spaces" encompasses. On the day I visited the exhibition, most of the others in attendance were a generation or more younger than myself, and the word "groovy" was reiterated more times than I could count. The faces of the young are happy in these "Spaces,"

which, for someone whose attachment to the old culture, with all its complexity of mind and emotion, has not been completely lobotomized, is probably the most chilling aspect of the whole event.

For what we are offered here is a facile synthesis of theater, architecture and technology with none of the responsibilities — esthetic, moral or functional — which these separate disciplines exact from both their artists and their audiences. The yearning for innocence, for simplicity and release from the bonds of culture and society — all this would be rather touching if the means of achieving them were not so egregiously mechanical and manipulative, so deeply implicated in the worst features of society as we know it. As it is, "Spaces" simply situates itself at the very center of that large moral and esthetic void where most of our "advanced" art nowadays exists.



Franz Erhard Walther (center), administering his "Instruments for Processes," at the Museum of Modern Art
"A set of conditions rather than a finite object"

Friedman-Abel